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U.S. backs Israeli air strike, assails broad Mideast strife

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The Reagan administration refused to budge yesterday on its contention that the Israeli air strike in Tunisia was a justifiable "expression of self-defense" but strengthened, in general terms, its condemnation of violence in the region.

In light of "repeated attempts to infiltrate terrorists into Israel" and the murder last week of three Israelis in Cyprus, "the air strike is understandable as an expression of self-defense," the White House and State Department said in identical statements.

"As a general principle, while we deplore resorting to violence, those who practice terrorism cannot assume they are immune from retaliation for their terrorist acts," the statement said.

In deploring the "rising pattern of violence in the region," the administration statement said:

"Such acts of violence are contrary to our overall objective of a peaceful, stable Middle East, and cannot be condoned."

On Tuesday Israel, using U.S.-made jets, bombed the headquarters of Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization in the suburbs of Tunis, the Tunisian capital, killing an estimated 60 people.

The attack has been condemned by Middle East and some Western European nations and has caused widespread concern that it will further hamper the already shaky search for peace in the region.

President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia condemned the United States for its "negative and unexpected" endorsement of the Israeli air raid Tuesday that destroyed the PLO headquarters.

Mr. Bourguiba, after an emergency morning meeting with U.S. Ambassador Peter Sebastien, issued a statement asking the United States to reconsider its public defense of the raid.

Later yesterday, Tunisia called on the U.N. Security Council to condemn the Israeli attack.

PLO chief Arafat, who was not at the compound during the attack, also condemned the United States for "its shameful cooperation with Israel."

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said President Reagan has sent a message of condolence to President Bourguiba for the deaths of Tunisian citizens in the air strike.

"But at the same time, we believe

in the right of self-defense against terrorists wherever they may be harbored," Mr. Speakes said.

"It is our own policy to strike back at terrorism. It is understandable when we can go to the homeland of those who caused the problem, to the site and the people. President Rea-

gan has said he has confidence in Israeli intelligence."

Mr. Speakes said he saw no inconsistency in the U.S. deploring the violence but at the same time calling it a legitimate expression of self-defense.

He and State Department spokesman Charles Redman also said the administration was still looking into whether the use of U.S. aircraft

in the raid was a violation of the Export Control Act which prohibits use of such weapons except in self-defense.

Mr. Redman said Israel has confirmed American-made F-15 jet fighters were used in the attack.

Meanwhile, Mr. Speakes said National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane on Tuesday told GOP congressional leaders the Israelis had carried out operations against three ships carrying terrorists off the Israeli coast between April and August.

"That's why we say this [air strike] was understandable," Mr. Speakes said.

He said Secretary of State George Shultz also reaffirmed that the United States made clear in its opposition to acts of violence from whatever quarter they come. But he also said U.S. opposition to terrorism is well-known and unswerving and that the international community must be able to defend against such acts.

"Without such defense," said Mr. Speakes, "the practitioners of terrorism in the Middle East will move closer to their goal of stopping efforts toward peace in the region. We must not allow this violence to harm or hinder the efforts we and others are exerting to bring peace to the Middle East."